

## Article

---

### "Translation in Intersystemic Interaction: A Case Study of Eighteenth-Century Russia"

Sergey Tyulenev

*TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, vol. 23, n° 1, 2010, p. 165-189.

Pour citer cet article, utiliser l'information suivante :

URI: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/044933ar>

DOI: 10.7202/044933ar

Note : les règles d'écriture des références bibliographiques peuvent varier selon les différents domaines du savoir.

---

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter à l'URI <https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

---

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. Érudit offre des services d'édition numérique de documents scientifiques depuis 1998.

Pour communiquer avec les responsables d'Érudit : [info@erudit.org](mailto:info@erudit.org)

# Translation in Intersystemic Interaction: A Case Study of Eighteenth-Century Russia<sup>1</sup>

Sergey Tyulenev

*It is the gift of theory that helps us realize what needs explanation.*

-John Alcock (2001, p. 33)

## Introduction

We are still spellbound by the anthropocentric vision of social processes (Luhmann, 1995, p. 211 et seq.; Moeller, 2006, p. 79 et seq.). Little wonder, then, that when—in the peripatetic and zigzagging progress of Translation Studies (TS)—translation has come to be theorized as a social activity, the theorization is also done anthropocentrically (see Snell-Hornby, 2006; Wolf, 2006).<sup>2</sup> More often than not, *translation* studies turn into *translators* study. We wage battles in order to make translators

---

1 I would like to express my gratitude to Jessica Moore for her help in the preparation of the paper for publication.

2 Complaints that TS has been concerned primarily with texts (source-texts and then target-texts with their respective social contextualizations) seem to be somewhat of an exaggeration—good for an “editorial” championing the cause of *translators* vs. *translations*, but nonetheless an exaggeration (see Pym, 2003). This seems to be true only if primarily DTS studies are gathered for analysis, and the galleries of portraits of translators in works by Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth or in collections like Whitfield (2006) are for some reason forgotten.

visible. We embark on historical crusades to save the souls of forgotten translators and translatore**sses** and to reconstruct fields of socially conditioned subjectivities—because it is a history of translators, not of translation, that we write. Even social systems theories (SST), such as Luhmann's, are evoked to help train our focus firmly on the *agents* of the process of the production and consumption of translation.

This “humanist” stance has been inherited by TS from social sciences. As a result, we care so much for translators that we sometimes throw the baby (translation) out with the bathwater—that is, with any studies which seem to undermine our cause: we still have a complex of second-rank citizens as translators/interpreters in the *polis* of a society, as scholars of “*an obscure branch*” in the happy tree of the humanities (“Translation Studies? What's that?”). As a consequence, studying translators as people has become both our battle cry and the password by which we tell those who are with us from those who are not. We even devise ways to forget about “text,” the very essence of communication. Anyone who suggests something that might cause the “human being” to vanish, like a footprint in the sand at the seashore, inevitably breaks into the holiest of holies and creates the abomination of desolation.

Yet the question is not what to prefer to what or what to abandon for what.<sup>3</sup> Translation seen as a social practice embraces many aspects, and the more that are studied the better, but the study of each one requires a specific methodology. To define translation as a socially determined activity is not enough: a further concretization is necessary. The existence of different understandings of the term *social* has caused some confusion. “Social” may be understood differently depending on whether

---

3 Unless, that is, we want to turn scholarly research into a battlefield for rallying forces to support our ideas by making one-way causations. There is, however, a difference between the study of seals by zoologists and Brigitte Bardot's crusade to save them. Therefore, translation is worth studying as it is (whether it is influential enough or not) and simply because it exists (cf. Pym, 2003, pp. 11 and 23).

we mean psycho-social or social proper.<sup>4</sup> Luhmann wrote that a hundred years of research on psychological and social phenomena has shown the impossibility of integrated knowledge (2002, pp. 155-156). By the same token, it behooves us to define the angle of consideration of translation(-related) phenomena. Are we going to study translation as an activity practiced by people—translators—influenced by the society in which they live and work, or are we going to consider translation as a social mechanism? When we confuse these aspects, we end up painting “portraits” of a sort which have a little bit of everything in them: a bit of a human agent, a bit of social agency, and a bit of political-ideological background in order to explain a *habitus*.<sup>5</sup> Yet this type of study has little explanatory potential; it turns out, in fact, to be little more than the archaeologist’s finding as compared to the historian’s explanation.

All these clarifications necessitate a formulation of the stance taken in the present paper. I will consider translation as a subsystem within an overall social system. One of the ways to inquire into the social functions of translation from this perspective is to apply Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory, as the most comprehensive and sophisticated sociological theory of society as a system to date. Before embarking on the case study of

---

4 Whether there is a difference in the terms psycho-social and socio-psychological to stress different pre-eminence of objects of study is a matter of casuistry for the present paper.

5 In fact, sometimes the term “habitus” sounds rather like a sophisticated replacement for the pedestrian “biography.” When “habitus” is analyzed, the point is not only to show how a translator is brought up in this or that family, in this or that social milieu, but to show his/her subjective-objective involvements with this milieu—being influenced by and influencing this milieu. As compared to a biography, the student should take a more generalized view of the studied social “field” in its interactions with other “fields.” Such a generalized view should be shared by all sociologically-informed research. The individual is approached from the viewpoint of the social (otherwise, it is psychology or socio-psychology with their respective methods of investigation). On the one hand, the individual is “sliced” and shown as organically joined to the social; on the other hand, the “social” is viewed, as it were, under a microscope to see what it is composed of and whether/when it is reducible to the individual.

eighteenth-century Russia, I will recapitulate the most important aspects of this theory that are applicable to research focusing on translation. But before that, a few words are to be said about other systemic paradigms; a comparison of them with Luhmann's social systems theory, if only cursory, will also be useful.

A systemic approach to the study of translation was first suggested by Itamar Even-Zohar (1979, 1990), who developed the Russian formalists' ideas about national literature as a polysystem (Tynianov, 1977, pp. 255-281). Scholars of the Tel-Aviv-Leuven school built on Even-Zohar's foundation and considerably furthered the research in numerous case studies. They also broadened the scope of consideration: translation was placed in its social context (Toury, 1995). By and large, however, translation was still almost exclusively considered as a system within the national literary polysystem. Yet the literary (poly) system is only one of the social domains where translation is practiced, and it was only logical that a further step be taken: translation came to be considered as part and parcel of the overall social system. For example, translation was studied in its cultural-political involvements in Brisset (1996). The next stage was to apply a sociological systemic paradigm. Andreas Poltermann (1992) was the first to suggest Luhmann's social systems theory as a paradigm for the study of translation. His initiative was furthered by Theo Hermans (1997, 1999, 2007a, 2007b). In all these attempts, however, to a lesser or greater degree, research still gravitated around literary translation. It seems that, by inertia, translation students persisted in limiting their research to only one aspect of translation's social-systemic functioning. Another aspect of the social studies of translation was the application of Pierre Bourdieu's social theory (Casanova 2002; Inghilleri 2005).

Some translation students wonder if we need both Luhmann's social systems theory and Bourdieu's social theory. Is it not enough to have the polysystem theory and Bourdieu's theory with its focus on social fields and social agency? The answer is an emphatic "no." I argue elsewhere that neither of these two theories is all-embracing in and of itself (Tyulenev, 2009a). Luhmann's is a functionalist view of society—that is, he studies society as a system of functionally interdependent components.

Bourdieu views society as fields with interacting agents of different backgrounds, with different interests and statuses. If one engages in the study of translation as a social function, Luhmann's social systems theory is more appropriate as a basis; if one's endeavor is to see a network of translation-related social phenomena (e.g., norms and standards) and translators as agents, it makes sense to choose Bourdieu's theory of society. This is not to say, however, that these two social theories are the only ones that deserve the attention of the student of social involvements of translation. I mention only these two here because they are the few that have, thus far, been applied to the study of translation, and because echoes of the question "Why do we need Luhmann if we already have Bourdieu?" can be heard throughout the world of TS. Allow me to emphasize that the two theories are not interchangeable; they do not exclude but rather complement each other (see Tyulenev, 2009b).

## **1. Luhmann's Social Systems Theory**

System is understood as a social formation with its own particular communication. Communication is "a change in the state of complex *A* correspond[ing] to a change in the state of complex *B*, even if both complexes had other possibilities for determining their states" (Luhmann, 1995, p. 39). From this viewpoint, communication means "a coordinated selectivity" (*ibid.*, p. 154). The interaction of complexes *A* and *B*, based on a certain type of selectivity of available options of exchange (i.e., on a certain type of communication) unique to the interaction of *A* and *B*, produces a social system. This social system's unique communication makes it different from its environment. The environment is composed of other systems with their own communications. The system may see its environment as a unified "lack" of the system's communication: "Every system removes itself from its environment. [...] 'The' environment is only a negative correlate of the system. [...] one can say that the system *totalizes itself* by referring to the environment and by leaving it undetermined. The environment is simply 'everything else'" (*ibid.*, p. 181).

However, at a certain stage of its development the system becomes more informed about its environment by noticing the

environment as composed of systems. "The environment contains many more or less complex systems, which can have contact with the system for which they are the environment because it is part of *their* environments [...] [This is when] systems reciprocally find each other in their respective environments" (*ibid.*, pp. 181-182).

The system is a self-reproducing (autopoietic) unity that operates by means of constantly observing its own communication and protecting its communication from all intrusions. Despite being operatively closed, the system has a relationship with its environment. The environment provides the background for the system's self-identification; the system relies on the environment for certain resources (energy and information); finally, the system exercises an influence on its environment. The system's self-reproduction occurs through self- and other-reference. On the one hand, the system observes its own communication and reproduces this communication for/as its autopoiesis. On the other hand, the system compares its communication with the environment.

The system's inner structure is composed of subsystems. Some of these subsystems are oriented towards inner processes (the system's inner communication); others are oriented towards the environment. In modern society, these subsystems are function-based (as opposed to pre-modern societies; see Luhmann, 1997, pp. 634-776). Hence, we see subsystems such as law, economy, politics, art, education.

## 2. The Place of Translation within the Social System

Applying social systems theory to translation provides us with the theoretical ground to address some fundamental issues of translation theory raised in the 1970-1990s by Itamar Even-Zohar (e.g., 1979, 1990). One such issue was that of overcoming the barrier between translation and transfer. The former may be considered as a special case of the latter. According to Even-Zohar, the failure to appreciate their fundamental affinity leads to the artificial separation of homologous phenomena (1990, p. 74). To understand these translational procedures in all their

complexity, one must apply “global models” in order to redress the balance between various (hierarchically organized) factors influencing translational procedures (*ibid.*, pp. 76-77).

The next step in considering translation as an autopoietic system was made by Theo Hermans (1997, 1999), who applied Luhmann’s social systems theory. Following Luhmann’s analysis of law, economy, politics, religion, art, and education as social systems, Hermans described translation as a social system as well. Although one has to admit that Hermans’ theoretical considerations have indisputable merits, in my opinion, some important adjustments should be made of his description of translation as a social system. Such a description of translation (as a social system) does not enable us to pinpoint “the hierarchy of [...] constraints” (Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 77) which determine translational procedures in their social involvements to the same extent that we are able when these procedures are theorized by considering translation as a subsystem of the social system.<sup>6</sup>

Translation should be considered as one of the subsystems that are located on the boundary of the system. It is, therefore, a boundary phenomenon. Its responsibility is twofold: to separate the system and the environment, and to connect them.<sup>7</sup> As a boundary phenomenon, translation exercises the opening/closing function of the system boundary. Indeed, translation makes texts from the environment available for the system, thereby opening the system to its environment. However, translation rarely transmits these texts as they are in the environment; rather, it filters their content and transforms them. In this sense, translation closes the

---

6 If we consider these subsystems on the intrasystemic scale, i.e., in relation to each other as equal constituents of the social system, rather than in relation to the entire social system, these subsystems may be termed “function systems” (e.g., Luhmann, 2000). In this paper, however, in order to avoid confusion, I will reserve the term “system” for the social system taken in its entirety (e.g., the Russian empire) and the term “subsystem” for functionally differentiated components of the social system (e.g., translation subsystem or legal subsystem).

7 I do not discuss intrasystemic or global-systemic mediation of translation in this paper.



system. Thus, from the social-systemic viewpoint, translation can be defined as a social subsystem whose function is mediation on the intersystemic level.

Translation can play a more or less active role in different systems and in different periods of history. This depends on what type of conditioning of the system's communication translation participates in. Its role as an intermediary between the system and its environment may be: (1) not significant for unfolding social processes; (2) complementary (a "catalytic agent" of social processes); or (3) a constraint (*sine qua non*) for unfolding processes (Even-Zohar, 1979). To determine the social role of translation in a particular social structure at a particular moment of its history is to define what type of conditioning translation takes/took part in.

### 3. Translation in Systemic Couplings and Interpenetration

One important aspect of Luhmann's social systems theory is that it considers society as a communication system whose elements are communication events. In other words, according to Luhmann, social systems consist of communication events and not of people. This break with the traditional anthropological view of society is often misunderstood (Luhmann, 1995, p. 210 et seq.; Moeller, 2006, p. 5 et seq.). Some misinterpret his theory as an attempt to dehumanize Sociology, and they find it puzzling and illogical when Luhmann and those who apply Luhmann do mention people. The problem is that when some critics hear that the social realm is theorized by Luhmann as consisting of communication events, they stop at that point and, without having fully understood the theory, blame Luhmann for the dehumanization of society and Sociology. The student of translation might conclude that, according to Luhmann, translation must be described without translators, and reject Luhmann's version of social theory. Indeed, when Translation Studies is striving to raise the social status of the translator, social systems theory is regarded with suspicion. Yet it is the critic, not Luhmann, who dehumanizes society, and the critic creates a sort of de-Luhmannized Luhmann, if I may make a pun. What Luhmann suggests is a more refined focus: the social realm is what is communicated (verbally or non-verbally)

and thus made socially “visible.” Thoughts, for instance, are not socially visible and should be studied with different methods and by a different science: psychology. Translation as a socially “visible” phenomenon (text in a broad sense or text production) cannot exist without the psychic systems involved in translation. When we speak of the *translator*, however, we are not being specific enough. The translator is a combination of three types of systems: biological (body), psychic and social. Socially relevant translation research focuses on social (inter-humanly communicated) facts, whereas psychology concentrates on intra-human phenomena. In this light, the concepts of “people”/“translators” turn out to be too crude, and fuzzy; they necessitate further precision with regards to the three types of systems involved. Luhmann’s SST provides us with the tools we need to meet this challenge. Thus, it is a matter of focus: one can name a person (as I do in my case study below), yet my focus is on the social sphere in which that person’s acts occur.

Being operational closures, systems interact. Their interactional openness is referred to as structural coupling. Two systems shape each other’s environment in such a way that each depends on the other to continue its autopoiesis and to increase its structural complexity (Moeller, 2006, p. 19).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, no individual can influence the course of events in a society unless the latter resonates with this particular individual. If this happens, a systemic coupling occurs which introduces changes in the communication of the involved systems.

Systems may be in a relationship of interpenetration. In this case, a system makes its complexity available for the

---

8 By the term “structural coupling” I mean temporary interactions (e.g., between the social systems of France and Russia in the eighteenth century); by the term “interpenetration” I mean constant interactions (e.g., between psychic and social systems). I distinguish between these terms in order to emphasize the difference between the types of interaction important for TS (e.g., for discriminating between individual and social aspects of translation processes or between cognitive/psychological and social aspects). Apparently, this differentiation is less crucial for social philosophy—hence, the interchangeability of the terms “structural coupling” and “interpenetration” in Moeller (2006).

construction of another system. These systems have convergent elements but select and connect them differently. The existence of one system depends on the existence of the other. This is the case with human beings and social systems:

There are closed self-referential reproductions in human beings, which can be distinguished broadly as organic and psychic. The medium for one and the form in which it appears is *life*; for the other, this is *consciousness*. Autopoiesis qua life and qua consciousness is a presupposition for forming social systems, which means that social systems can actualize their own reproduction only if they can be sure that life and consciousness will continue (Luhmann, 1995, p. 218-219).

Translation as a subsystem resonates with or is “irritated” by many systems in its environment, among them psychic systems and other social subsystems. Translation is in a relationship of interpenetration with both psychic systems and social systems. Depending on what structural-systemic involvement of translation as a subsystem we study, different objects will be the focus of our attention: individual translators, if we study translation in its interpenetration with psychic systems, or translation as communication events, if we consider translation as part of a social system. The case study at hand (the role of translation in the intersystemic communication of eighteenth-century Russia) is clearly of the latter type. Therefore, all psychological and linguistic aspects of analyzed translation events, for example, are considered not as psychological or linguistic factors per se; rather, they are interpreted from a social-systemic viewpoint.

#### 4. Translation in Eighteenth-Century Russia

In the eighteenth-century, Russia as a social system underwent a drastic reformation of virtually all aspects of its communication. After centuries of being a staunch follower of the Byzantine version of Orthodoxy and shut off from almost any influence of Catholic or Protestant “apostasy,” Russia suddenly expressed a strong aspiration to become part of Western Europe. Naturally, such a desire entailed a major transformation of social structures, mores, practices—the entire system of communication had to be revolutionized.

There was only one way to cope with this formidable task: to appropriate what was already available in Western Europe. In system-theoretical terms, the social system under consideration (the Russian empire) chose a section of its environment (Western European modernized countries) as a model to emulate. There was no other way to achieve this goal except to begin a transfer of sought “items” (communication elements) on a massive scale. To understand the social shock caused by Peter the Great’s westernization of Russia and the ensuing resistance in all social strata, one has to keep in mind the intrinsic reluctance of any social system to open its communication, which is the vital component of its operational closure and its “holiest of holies”—autopoiesis, to environmental (foreign) influences. The system faced a major risk: the loss of its identity, its difference with respect to the environment. This fear explains the popular dubbing of Peter as Antichrist in the apocalyptic demise of “Old Russia” which persisted well into the twentieth century and whose traces can be found even today.

Yet, despite all opposition, Peter continued the transfer. The application of Luhmann’s social systems theory allows us to appreciate the scale of the reforms and the role of translation in them. The large-scale influx of Western European knowledge into Russia would not have been possible without translation. Translations of various publications and transfers of ideas, concepts, patterns of behavior, aesthetic and ethic values became a *sine qua non* of Russia’s westernization (cf. Even-Zohar, 1990). All these transferred items will be treated as semiotic texts.

## **5. Translation as a Boundary Phenomenon**

Translation belongs to the system’s boundary phenomena. Boundaries function on different levels. In the simplest case, the system treats its environment as another system. National boundaries, understood as geo-political frontiers, are only a special case of the system/environment interaction. When the system enters into contact with economic, political, scientific, or educational aspects of its environment, the boundary moves inside the respective subsystems and may even pass through carriers of the social system’s communication.

To give an example, at the very end of the seventeenth-century, hundreds of Russians were exposed to Western European values. Peter the Great himself was one of them. He showed a keen interest in all things Western European throughout his life. As a youth, he learned a great deal from foreigners who lived in the Moscow Foreign District. Later, he travelled to Europe several times and was the first Russian tsar to embark on such a long voyage to lands that had hitherto been stigmatized as apostate and therefore unworthy of attention. Peter, however, went there to learn from these "apostates!" All the things he learned (and other Russians who went abroad or had contact with foreigners in Russia learned) were transferred into the Russian system communication and eventually contributed to its westernization. Thus Peter and others like him became the locus of the system's boundary because transfers were carried out through them.

Naturally not all communication events occurring through these people had the same resonance in the social system. The degree varied depending on how much power was held by this or that carrier of the system communication and on how ready the system was to respond positively to this or that irritation. Communication acts and individual actions are not equal in terms of what Luhmann calls collective action. Collective action is designated by symbols that make it clear that this action is binding for the entire system (Luhmann, 1995, pp. 199-200).<sup>9</sup> Harbingers of westernization in Russia were known long before Peter, but their "irritations" of the system did not produce any resonance within the system. In the case of Peter, two factors conflated. On the one hand, the modernization of Russia was an urgent necessity; this had become obvious through major military fiascos. On the other hand, Peter's initiatives were not just individual actions; they had the status of collective action. Early westernizers had not been vested with as much power to make a large-scale systemic change as was a tsar.

Introducing new elements into the system communication through these broadly understood boundaries exemplifies the

---

<sup>9</sup> The notion "collective action" is comparable to Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital of a social field.

opening function of translation as a boundary phenomenon. However, many examples can also be adduced to show how translation was used to refuse access to certain communication elements coming from the environment. For instance, when a geography book by Johann Huebner was translated into Russian in order to “set an example” for Russian geographers, Peter found the chapter on Russia “completely misleading” and ordered Count Brius to write a new one (Kirilov, 1977, p. 17). This shows how, at times, translation was not a complete refusal (the book *was* translated) but only a partial one (the communication event was “sieved” through a filter).

## **6. Two Directions of Intersystemic Communication**

Intersystemic communication is carried out in two directions: from the environment into the system and from the system into the environment. At different times or in different thematic areas, the system and the environment alternate as the “input-source” or the “output-receiver.” In the case of eighteenth-century Russia, virtually all the system/environment dealings were carried out through translation. Translation became a mechanism of “throughput” between the system and its environment (Luhmann, 1995, p. 201).

Petrine Russia was predominantly the environment’s (Western Europe’s) output-receiver. Later, especially during the reigns of Elizabeth, Peter’s daughter (1741-1762), and Catherine the Great (1762-1796), when Russia had secured a stronger position in Western Europe, the system became both a receiver of the Western European output and a source of input for the environment. What is of importance for us here is that the throughput in any variant of role distribution was carried out by means of translation. Let us consider this in detail.

## **7. Pre-Petrine Russia: the Output-Receiver**

The radically activated system/environment throughput of Petrine Russia was in stark contrast with Russia’s previous history. Up until the early eighteenth century, Russia was isolated from Western Europe. Early western travelers passing through

Russia had trouble distinguishing it from Bohemia and Tatars (Mohrenschildt, 1936, p. 160). The Hanseatic League and England became the first contacts Russia had with Western Europe (*ibid.*, pp. 165 and 181). This was the beginning of the system/environment interaction and of the throughput process.

Little by little, the system evolved, and new structures, necessary for dealing with the “abroad,” were established. The Posol’skii Prikaz, an equivalent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was among such structures. In the Posol’skii Prikaz, there were translators from Latin, Swiss, German, Polish, Greek, Tatar, and other languages. A “newspaper,” *Kuranty*, was launched. *Kuranty* was a primary source of information about life in countries abroad. The title came from one of the Western European vernaculars and can be traced back to the Latin word meaning “current,” “running.” The Posol’skii Prikaz received no less than twenty newspapers in German, Polish, Dutch, and Italian. All of them were translated into Russian, and the most important pieces of news were selected for *Kuranty*. The readership was limited to the tsar, his immediate circle and high-ranking state officials. The earliest known issue of *Kuranty* is dated 1621. The newspaper was produced over a period of eighty years; each time only one copy was made. It presented news very succinctly, indicating the source language and telling the gist of the story. *Kuranty* was a modest precursor of Peter’s newspaper *Vedomosti* (The News) and numerous “mass media” publications of Catherinian Russia. As a throughput mechanism, translation became an essential social structure for the system to receive the environment’s output.

The system’s own output was minimal. Initially, in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, there was no significant input/output exchange. In this period, we may only speak of the system’s being the environment’s output-receiver. The Russian empire of the time may be described as a social system that did not exploit the possibility of constructing its own image in its environment via an input/output schema (Luhmann, 1995, p. 204).

## **8. Petrine and Post-Petrine Russia: A Full-Scale Throughput**

A very different picture emerged during Peter's time, and after. The situation changed radically with the input increasing enormously (Hughes, 2006, pp. 67-91). This state of the system neatly falls under the following description given by Luhmann:

The system/environment difference is raised to a combinatory level on which more dependencies and independencies can be actualized at the same time. The system becomes more dependent on certain properties or processes in the environment—namely, those relevant for input or for registering output [...] It can achieve more sensitivity, more clarity in perceiving the environment [...]. (1995, p. 204)

Indeed, Russia under Peter, with its chief goal of “catching up” with the West, became much more dependent on what its environment had to provide for the unfolding process of modernization. One may say, metaphorically, that the system's sight became sharper; as a result, the system's view of the environment became clearer. The system's inner structures—its eyes and ears—whose primary responsibility was to observe the environment, developed into much more complex subsystems. Translation was one of them.

The increasing input produced the necessity to increase output. Naturally, translation was called upon to participate in the transfer of the system-generated output. The output was regulated by the system “depending on what [was] available as input” (Luhmann, 1995, p. 204). The aim and purpose of the output was to balance the input. The volume of input was so overwhelming that it endangered the system's self-identity. Publications were translated on a massive scale or they were read in the originals and transferred into the Russian systemic communication by system communication carriers in the form of new views, values, moral standards, etc.; Western European specialists were recruited, thereby bringing Western European communication inside Russia on an unprecedented scale. Hence, the system had to drastically increase output (through translation). The system had to ensure a clear demarcation between itself and its environment. Without ceasing to be a mechanism of output-receiving, translation began to play a vital role in the balancing



of the environment's output via the system's input (into the environment).<sup>10</sup>

### 8.1 Translating for the West

In Petrine Russia, the balancing role of translation can be observed in the increase of translations made/commissioned by the system that were aimed at a Western European readership and intended for circulation abroad. The goal was to make the environment aware of the system, its inner state and its achievements. Let us consider some examples.<sup>11</sup>

Translations into foreign languages were used for announcing Russia's military victories. After his victory in Poltava over the Swedish army (1709), Peter was greeted in Kiev with a speech by a local priest, Feofan Prokopovich.<sup>12</sup> Peter liked the speech very much and ordered that it be published in Russian and in Latin translation. If the Russian original was destined for the Russian readership, the Latin version was clearly intended for Western European political circles.

Pieces of news about Peter's other military victories were circulated in Western Europe in translation. Russian ambassadors commissioned translators/writers to translate/write about Russia and its successes. In fact, ordering such materials was one of

---

10 There is an immense amount of literature on the degree of Western European influence on eighteenth-century Russia (e.g., Lieven, 2006). Therefore, I will concentrate on a lesser-known aspect: Russia's efforts to become an input-source for the environment.

11 There were two types of literature about Russia in foreign languages. One was produced by foreigners through their own initiative, i.e., these texts were not commissioned by Russia as a system. The initiative for their production was that of the environment. The other type was texts (translations) produced or commissioned by the system. Only this second type, through which the system was projecting information about itself into the environment, will be discussed here.

12 After this, Peter invited Prokopovich to follow him to Moscow and, later, to Saint-Petersburg. Prokopovich eventually became one of the most prominent mouthpieces of Petrine reforms.

the ambassadors' responsibilities.<sup>13</sup> During his Persian military campaign, Peter took the pains to bring along a printing press from the Moscow printing shop. The press was used for printing the so-called Turkish manifestos. In 1722, a manifesto about Peter's seizure of Derbent was presented to the Duke of Holstein, first in Russian and later in a German version. The manifestos were also published in Turkish. Apparently, a Latin version existed as well (Pekarskii, 1972, vol. 2, pp. 577-579 and 652-653; Pekarskii, 1972, vol. 1, p. 237; Luppov, 1973, pp. 57 and 68).

These are examples of Russia's growing concern about its image in Western Europe. The system began projecting information about itself and thereby eliminated lacunas in the Western European environment's knowledge about the system. This growing output was the result of the input the system was receiving from the environment. Among other things, this input signaled the necessity of creating/adjusting the system's image in the environment.

## **8.2 Rossica and Catherinian Russia**

After Peter, a significant corpus of texts about Russia appeared in Europe, written either by foreigners or by Russians and translated into foreign languages. This corpus is referred to as *rossica* (Somov, 1986, p. 173). The most typical themes in *rossica* were Peter's reforms, the person of the emperor himself, the coup-d'états that followed his death, and Catherine II and her home and foreign policy.

To be sure, the Russian Crown encouraged and generously rewarded those who wrote about *glorious* Russia. This was the case during the Russian-Greek campaign, when Russia presented itself as the liberator of Greece from the Turkish yoke and the guarantor of Greek revival. For example, Catherine rewarded a Neapolitan, Domenico Diodati, for his book *De Christo Graece loquente*, bestowing a golden medal upon him and a sumptuous

---

13 One such case is discussed by Venturi (1975, pp. 120-121). After General Count Orlov visited Naples, a letter praising him was sent for publication in the newspaper *Notizie del mondo* (*The News of the World*). This is a typical example of Catherine's propaganda.

edition of her plan for Russian legislation, with translations into Russian, Latin, French, and German. The Saint-Petersburg Academy of Sciences rewarded another panegyrist of Russia, Francesco Mario Pagano, for his eulogy for Count Orlov—*Oratio ad comitem Alexium Orlov virum immortalem, victrici Moschorum classi in expeditione in Mediterraneum mare summon cum imperio praefectum* [*A Speech to Count Alexei Orlov, an Immortal Man, Commander-in-Chief of the Moscow Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea Expedition*] (Venturi, 1975, pp. 121-122).

Yet not all circulated publications were to the Russian government's liking. Catherine's range of counter-actions was listed in her recommendation on how to deal with the author of a "newspaper" published in London in October 1763. The newspaper contained passages tarnishing the reputation of the Russian court. Catherine demanded one of the following: (1) that the author be beaten; (2) that he be bribed so that he would stop writing; (3) that he be killed; or (4) that he be forced to write in defense of the Russian court (Somov, 1986, p. 182). The Russian government had begun to realize the power of antidote-type publications for Russia's image and prestige on the European scene. Although beating, bribing and killing were still acceptable measures, the Russian crown started to commission publications "in defense of the Russian court." These publications were penned by foreign authors of the highest caliber (notably, Diderot and Voltaire) and published in the most prominent European languages. Diderot participated in the translation of a book on the Russian educational system written by Ivan Betskii, one of Catherine's courtiers. Voltaire was commissioned by the Russian court to write a history of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great and a number of pamphlets in support of Russian policy in Poland. Later, he ironically remarked about himself and his fellow European correspondents of Catherine the Great that they were secular missionaries preaching the cult of Saint Catherine. He seems to have been less ironic when he wrote his panegyrics on Russian victories during the First Turkish War (1768-1774). For example, he discussed the Russian capture of the Turkish Khotin fortress in 1769 as follows:

O Minerve du Nord, ô toi, sœur d'Apollon,  
Tu vengeras la Grèce en chassant ces infâmes,  
Ces ennemis des arts et ces geôliers de femmes [...].<sup>14</sup>

Not all commissioned publications were full-blown translations. Some potential authors were supplied with original materials or translations of such materials, which were incorporated into Western authors' own publications. For example, when Voltaire was asked to write a history of Russia, Mikhail Lomonosov prepared necessary extracts from primary sources or Russian historical accounts. These extracts were translated into French and sent to Voltaire (Menshutkin, 1947, p. 218).

Catherine's *Instructions to the Legislative Commission of 1767*, an important document for the westernization of Russian legislation, was published several times in French. The *Instructions* greatly contributed to her fame as an enlightened European monarch. This is, once again, a clear example of the system's projecting information about itself into its environment. Thus, the system made an effort to produce an output that would adjust the environment's vision of it. This was done by means of translation as a systemic throughput mechanism.

### 8.3 Antidotes

Another way for the system to counteract the unfavourable images created in the environment was to produce antidotes. The system obviously controlled the part of *rossica* that it commissioned.<sup>15</sup> But the system had little control over the part of the *rossica* that

---

14 O Minerva of the North, O you sister of Apollo,/ You will avenge Greece by chasing out those reprobates, /Those enemies of the arts and jailors of women [...] (Whittaker, 2003, p. 64).

15 Apparently, however, not everything went smoothly. Although some of the publications (for example, P.-Ch. Levêque's *Histoire de Russie* published in Paris in 1782 and N.-G. LeClerc's *Histoire physique, morale, civile et politique de la Russie ancienne et moderne* published in Paris in 1783-1794) were commissioned by the Russian crown, the commissioner was not always satisfied with the outcome. Thus, for instance, Catherine severely critiqued both Levêque's and LeClerc's works.

was written by foreigners. The system could, however, respond with antidotes. The purpose of such antidotes was to adjust the image of the system as presented in various publications.

For example, *Voyage en Sibérie* was published in Paris by Chappe d'Auteroche. The system reacted with *Antidote, ou examen du Mauvais livre intitulé: Voyage en Sibérie fait en 1761* (Amsterdam, 1771-1772). Catherine herself took to anonymously criticizing d'Auteroche's book. First of all, she disagreed with his definition of the Russian political regime as backward and despotic. As a counter-argument, she pointed to her own legislative accomplishments. Mikhail Lomonosov and Alexander Sumarokov's literary achievements served as an argument against d'Auteroche's claim that the Russians were rude, immoral, and uncivilized. The empress' response was remarkably detailed: she left none of d'Auteroche's alleged mistakes without comment.

Ivan Boltin's *Notes on the History of Ancient and Modern Russia by Mr. LeClerc* (1788) was commissioned by Catherine and provides another example of the system's riposte. In his *Notes*, Boltin criticized LeClerc for the backwardness of his presentation of pre-Petrine Russia and factual mistakes.

Antidotes are examples of covert translations. The mechanism of their creation from the translational viewpoint was as follows: a carrier of the system's communication would author an antidote, thereby transferring his/her views of the system's communication into another language and cultural terminology in order to influence the system's environment. As such, Catherine's *Antidote* and similar ripostes serve as examples of translation as a mechanism of the system acting as an input-source for its environment. The intrasystemic communication reacted to a piece of extrasystemic (environmental) communication.

## Conclusion

Viewed in terms of the social systems theory, translation is a social structure whose function is to mediate between texts (in the broadest semiotic sense) on the intersystemic level. Translation is "located" on the broadly conceived boundary of the social system, thereby either opening or closing the system.

Intersystemic interaction may be described as a throughput. Translation acts as a mechanism of this throughput between the system and its environment. At times, the system is an output-receiver and the environment is an input-source; at other times, the reverse is true. In pre-Petrine Russia, due to the lack of intersystemic involvements of the system, translation was not a significant means of intersystemic interaction. In the eighteenth century, the system opened itself to environmental influences, or input from the environment (which had to be balanced by output), and translation took on a central role as a mechanism of throughput between the system and its environment. I have concentrated on the system's output and the role of translation. Translation participated in the system's informing the environment about itself and was also part of the system's reaction to unfavourable opinions circulating in the environment. Creating text-antidotes or texts of an informative nature was a way to counteract the environment's lack of awareness about or antagonism towards the system. Translating these texts was an indispensable means for making them available to the environment, and was thus a constructive act for Russia's positive image in its environment.

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

### References

- ALCOCK, John (2001). *The Triumph of Sociobiology*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- BRISSET, Annie (1996 [1990]). *A Sociocritique of Translation*. Trans. R. Gill and R. Gannon, Toronto, Toronto University Press.
- CASANOVA, Pascale (2002). "Consécration et accumulation de capital littéraire: La traduction comme échange inégal." *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 144, pp. 7-20.
- EVEN-ZOHAR, Itamar (1979). "Polysystem Theory." *Poetics Today*, 1, 1-2, pp. 287-310.

EVEN-ZOHAR, Itamar (1990). "Polysystem Studies." *Poetics Today*, 11, 1.

HERMANS, Theo (1997). "Translation as Institution." In Mary Snell-Hornby, Zuzana Jettmarová and Klaus Kaindl, eds. *Translation as Intercultural Communication*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, pp. 3-20.

HERMANS, Theo (1999). *Translation in Systems. Descriptive and System-Oriented Approaches Explained*. Manchester, St. Jerome Publishing.

HERMANS, Theo (2007a). "Translation, Irritation and Resonance." In Michaela Wolf and Alexandra Fukari, eds. *Constructing a Sociology of Translation*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, pp. 57-75.

HERMANS, Theo (2007b). *The Conference of the tongues*. Manchester, St Jerome.

INGHILLERI, Moira, ed. (2005). *Bourdieu and the Sociology of Translation and Interpreting. The Translator*, 11, 2.

KIRILOV, Ivan (1977 [1831]). *Tsvetushcheie sostoianie Vserossiiskogo gosudarstva* [*Flourishing of the All-Russian State*]. Moscow, Nauka.

LIEVEN, Dominic, ed. (2006). *The Cambridge History of Russia. Vol. II: Imperial Russia, 1689-1917*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

LUHMANN, Niklas (1995). *Social Systems*. Trans. J. Bednarz, Jr. and Dirk Baecker. Stanford, California, Stanford University Press.

LUHMANN, Niklas (1997). *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp.

LUHMANN, Niklas (2000). *Art as a Social System*. Trans. Eva M. Knodt. Stanford, California, Stanford University Press.

LUHMANN, Niklas (2002). *Theories of Distinction: Redescribing the Descriptions of Modernity*. Trans. J. O'Neil, E. Schreiber, K. Behnke and W. Whobrey. Stanford, California, Stanford University Press.

LUPPOV, Sergei (1973). *Kniga v Rossii v pervoi chetverti 18 veka* [*Books in Russia in the Early Eighteenth Century*]. Leningrad, Nauka.

MENSHUTKIN, Boris (1947). *Zhizneopisanie Mikhaila Vasilievicha Lomonosova* [*The Life of Mikhail Lomonosov*]. Moscow-Leningrad, Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR.

MOELLER, Hans-Georg (2006). *Luhmann Explained: From Souls to Systems*. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois, Open Court.

MOHRENSCHILDT, Dimitri von (1936). *Russia in the Intellectual Life of Eighteenth-Century France*. New York and Morningside Heights, Columbia University Press.

PEKARSKII, Petr (1972 [1862]). *Nauka i literatura v Rossii pri Petre Velikom* [*Sciences and Literature in Russia during Peter the Great's Reign*]. Leipzig, Unveraenderter fotomechanischer Nachdruck der Originalausgabe 1862 nach dem Exemplar der Universitaetsbibliothek Leipzig, Zentralantiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik.

POLTERMANN, Andreas (1992). "Normen des literarischen Uebersetzens im System der Literatur." In Harald Kittel, ed. *Geschichte, System, Literarische Übersetzung/Histories, Systems, Literary Translations*, Berlin, E. Schmidt, pp. 5-31.

PYM, Anthony (2003). "Introduction. On the Social and the Cultural in Translation Studies." In Anthony Pym, Miriam Shlesinger and Zuzana Jettmarová, eds. *Sociocultural Aspects of Translating and Interpreting*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, pp. 1-25.

SNELL-HORNBY, Mary (2006). *The Turns of Translation Studies*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins.



SOMOV, Vladimir (1986). "Frantsuzskaia *Rossica* epokhi Prosveshenia i russkii chitatel [The French *Rossica* of the Enlightenment and the Russian Reader]." In Sergei Luppov, ed. *Frantsuzskaia kniga v Rossii v 18 v.: ocherki istorii* [*French Books in Eighteenth-Century Russia: Pages of History*]. Leningrad, Nauka, pp. 173-223.

TYNIA NOV, Iurii (1977). *Poetika. Istoriia literatury. Kino*. [Poetics. Literary History. Cinema]. Moscow, Nauka.

TOURY, Gideon (1995). *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins.

TYULENEV, Sergey (2009a). "Why (Not) Luhmann? On the Applicability of Social Systems Theory to Translation Studies." *Translation Studies*, 2, 2, pp. 147-162.

TYULENEV, Sergey (2009b). "The Meaning Constituting Function of Translation." Available on the site of *Canadian Association for Translation Studies: Young Researchers' Publications Online*: <[http://www.uottawa.ca/associations/act-cats/Young\\_Researchers\\_archive/Tyulenev-Meaning%20Constituting%20Function%20of%20Translation.pdf](http://www.uottawa.ca/associations/act-cats/Young_Researchers_archive/Tyulenev-Meaning%20Constituting%20Function%20of%20Translation.pdf)> [consulted 22 September 2010].

VENTURI, Franco (1975). "Neapolitanskie literaturnye otkliki na russko-turetskuiu voinu (1768-1774) [Neapolitan Literary Reports about Russo-Turkish War of 1768-1744]." In Ilia Serman, ed. *Russkaia literatura 18 veka i ee mezhdunarodnye sviazi* [*Eighteenth-century Russian Literature and Its International Involvements*]. Leningrad, Nauka, pp. 119-126.

WHITFIELD, Agnes, ed. (2006). *Writing Between the Lines: Portraits of Canadian Anglophone Translators*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006.

WHITTAKER, Cynthia Hyla, ed. (2003). *Russia Engages the World, 1453—1825*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, Harvard University Press.

WOLF, Michaela, ed. (2006). *Übersetzen – Translating – Traduire: Towards a "Social Turn"?* Vienna, LIT Verlag.

**ABSTRACT: Translation in Intersystemic Interaction: A Case Study of Eighteenth-Century Russia** — The article considers the applicability of Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory to the study of translation. The focus of this paper is the intersystemic aspect of translation's social involvements. Translation is considered as a social subsystem acting as a boundary phenomenon (opening/closing the system) and as a mechanism of the system/environment throughput. The theory of social-systemic functioning of translation is exemplified by a case study of the translation history of eighteenth-century Russia.

**RÉSUMÉ : La Traduction et l'interaction intersystémique : la Russie au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle** — L'article traite du rôle de la traduction dans les systèmes sociaux en appliquant la théorie des systèmes sociaux, élaborée par Niklas Luhmann. Cet article se concentre sur le concept d'interaction intersystémique dans les implications sociales de la traduction. La traduction est envisagée comme un sous-système social jouant le double rôle de frontière du système (ouverture/fermeture du système) et de mécanisme d'échange entre le système et l'environnement. La théorie du fonctionnement systémique et social de la traduction sera illustrée par des exemples tirés de l'histoire de la traduction en Russie au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle.

**Keywords:** translation, Sociology, Luhmann, system, history, Russia

**Mots-clés :** traduction, sociologie, Luhmann, système, histoire, Russie

**Sergey Tyulenev**

University of Cambridge

Department of Slavonic Studies

Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages

Sidgwick Avenue

Cambridge CB3 9DA UK

[sergeytlv@gmail.com](mailto:sergeytlv@gmail.com)